

A View from the Plains

On organizing in smaller areas of the Midwest

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What would it look like to develop strategies in apolitical areas and smaller areas far from more active and developed places of leftist activity? This is obviously an open-ended question with many implications and courses of action. Since our experiences in Occupy here in Iowa, this question has increasingly become, for me, an important one for revolutionary left organizing in areas like ours. Exploring these questions may help others in similar areas, in the Midwest or elsewhere, or even in big cities of the coasts.

People go where their needs can be satisfied, or they hope to anyway, where there are jobs and culture. Many of the most committed organizers find their needs and interests taking them to the major metropolitan areas. This is understandable because the ability to find politically like-minded people, and to act in accordance with those politics, seems much easier in a place with hundreds of thousands or even millions of people. A recent piece here talks about the ongoing tendency of radicals to move out of places like the Midwest for hotbeds like the Bay Area, a sentiment which I sympathize with if the projects described less so.

Still a number of people either remain in the places they are from or close to them, or in places similar to them, or perhaps move from larger areas or other regions. This may be because of family situations, fear or anxiety of new places, economic prospects, personal preference or any number of factors. There is also a tendency for people from even smaller, rural areas to move to more middle-sized places near to them, in a somewhat similar desire for jobs and culture lacking in the areas from which they come.¹

The differences and challenges of organizing in smaller areas might also have similarities with other areas, bigger than my own lived experiential examples, but maybe still non-politicized areas of low to non-existent organized leftist activity. Thus, those of us organizing outside of the coasts or major metro areas may have more in common with each other than the next biggest city closest to us. There are a few pieces I have come across that discuss organizing in smaller areas, but in general I have found very little on this subject. Since what has been documented so far is geared toward a different type of project, I would like to lay out what some of the more specific class struggle projects and dynamics look like in these areas.

Being here and not there

...our experience showed us the difficulty and slowness of the task of fostering revolutionary consciousness and popular alternative culture among ourselves and working people. It showed how much time, energy, and resources were necessary and the deep level of personal commitment required for the task in any community.

— Toronto Liberation School Collective, from *Organizing in a small town*
Published in Volume 1, Number 1 of *The Red Menace*, February 1976.

¹ I do not use “small town” here as it is a somewhat subjective and imprecise term. Approximately 44% of the total US population resides in metro areas of more than one million people. According to the latest census data (2010), 81.7% live in what are termed “urban areas”, this is defined as constituting more than 50,000 people. So we have a large section, 37% or 111 million people (assuming a total 300 mil US population), living in areas between 50,000 and one million people.

Although this subset does not appear to have been measured in 2010, according to the 2000 census about 10% of the US population lived in areas between 50,000 and 200,000, and these are the areas I have lived all my life. The middle-sized “urban areas” of the upper Midwest are what I have called home and what I have in mind throughout this piece.

The piece cited above details two individuals who worked at building a “revolutionary project” in a small Ontario town, who spent one year there and in that time built a workers center, which housed a child daycare collective and reading groups. This is impressive, as I have seen groups not accomplish as much over several years. I find it interesting that the difficulties described ring true all these years later and in different places, especially in terms of reaching people and in available resources, like physical space, money, time, and energy to keep going, in the end proving next to impossible to maintain.

There is something different going on in big cities, something in the way of an aggregate population with greater numbers of militants, radicals and the like-minded who can push already existing organizations, or build new ones more radically. Some form of leftist framework may be in place, such as a living history of political organizing from past struggles, community centers with a social justice purpose, sympathetic religious congregations, and so forth. These are potential spaces and resources where many come together in the form of liberal or radical community organizations or groups, and often it seems combinations thereof, even within one grouping or organization. As marginal and problematic as such spaces and projects may be, the degree to which they act as staging grounds and support networks for militants is perhaps overlooked. In my experiences in smaller areas, the severe lack of such a framework changes what is possible with a given project model, a model which may implicitly presuppose such supports.

But those in larger metro areas also generate and reinforce a certain kind of subculture, (probably good and bad for different reasons), that does not exist in smaller areas. That subculture is the complex web of friends and acquaintances, social coteries and cliques, bars, coffee shops and bookstores that people may frequent, and the different organizations, coalitions and projects people may be a part of on some level – that intangible network of relationships which holds together as a kind of subculture. For an organizational culture within this, one may find greater or lesser degrees of unity but it seems an overall higher degree of participation and greater numbers of supporters. Some drawbacks of this may be an alienating specificity to a milieu which becomes cliquish or inordinately subdivided. Although all of these are broad descriptions which I am sure break down differently depending on the particular metro area and organizational or informal groups in question, as far as a generalization goes these factors seem more or less apparent to me.

By contrast, those in smaller areas, do not have larger organizational, pre-existing politicized presences nor a militant subculture from those presences. With smaller groups, I include both less active supporters and more active organizers, possibly around 3–10 persons – you can do some things with these numbers, like putting on small events, organizing for attending bigger protests, conferences and the like, or setting up study groups. An active campaign of a bigger section of the community, one that speaks to and acts on institutional or economic issues, the kind of things that a class struggle project is predicated on, simply requires more people. This means working with those outside of an anti-capitalist militancy, which sets up difficulties of a myriad nature. For example, having a mixture of tendencies, from liberal progressives to anarcho-punks in the same room trying to talk about the same project, campaign or action can make for some strange meetings. This can result in talking past one another and spending more time trying to convince the other of some basic presupposed position than determining any clear line of action, and almost inevitably the project ends up dead in the water.

This also means that the above described militant subculture is practically non-existent. In my opinion, this is both good and bad in a sort of direct inversion to the metro area. That is, no

relatively large pool of people to draw from who know each other or who have worked together or may know of one another; but because there are fewer highly specified ideological subdivision going on, one often has to go outside political and personal comfort zones to be active in local struggles.

However, because the first and more important element is lacking, that of some manner of organized community presence, there are additional difficulties, namely the building of a fight-back, class struggle project itself. Identifying where local capitalist power lies, who is affected, and where the avenues for action are is no small feat. For another example, in the workplace organizing campaign, owing to the small numbers of supporters and the relative geographic isolation one is in, the ability to acquire the needed training, and build a campaign with others' involvement and support runs into serious difficulties.

Not that any of these things are ever easy. I would not want to suggest that those organizing on the coasts or in major metro areas have an easy time of it. What I seek to explore is the degree to which the less apparent, less tangible elements of projects may make them work in ways they don't in smaller and/or less politicized places, if indeed they work at all. It seems that the "glue" of a social, subcultural, but relatively militant network of support can be the necessary bolster to the always uphill battle of your given campaign or effort.

The models from the coasts

To start this next section with some context, my experiences of recent years have been drawn from what is often known as the class struggle anarchist or libertarian communist milieu. The examples provided below have some amount of specificity to that current, and websites such as libcom.org and the writings of these organizations, among others, are good resources for more information and background.

One of my attractions to class struggle anarchist politics was the thoughtful and strategic approaches to organizing, and taking up such approaches was hugely beneficial to developing my politics and experiences. To go a step farther and reflect on this modest level of experience, I will posit that some of the shortcomings that arise in a given model of organizing when applied in various locations and conditions might reveal weaknesses of the model or strategy itself. This is not to say that these are not still valuable models and strategies, but to view them with a critical eye based on local examples.

For instance, *especifismo* is a Latin American tradition of anarchism that heavily stresses working within already existing social movement formations as a specifically anarchist organization, this has been an influential current in the last couple of years in class struggle anarchist and libertarian communist politics especially.² In Iowa, some of us read the texts and followed North American discussions around them, but found a lot of difficulty as we looked around us and saw little to no actual social movement activity. What did exist was quite problematic politically, e.g. a group concentrating on electoral initiatives, or on further examination finding that the activity represented practically as small and marginal a group as our own. It is no great leap to then notice how social movements in the US are so few and far between as to be practically non-existent. We see a change in this somewhat beginning in 2008 and the various student mobilizations, especially in California, and following up through 2011 with the Occupy movement, and as described

² Some more information can be found machete408.wordpress.com and anarchistplatform.wordpress.com

below we had an active role in the local expression of this. But I would maintain these are a far cry from the type of broad-based, popular movements that *especificismo* was developed from, certainly among other differences in conditions and political culture between South and North America.

Another project taken on in our area was the solidarity network. This is a method of direct action fights built around workplace and housing grievances, in large part inspired by the Seattle Solidarity Network, or Seasol for short. In November 2010 we began to flyer around town with our email and a phone number to leave a message, and in January we held a public meeting announcing the solidarity network which was attended by about 25 people.

This project went for about 12 months, and in that time we probably averaged 2–3 calls per month. The overwhelming majority of them were housing related, very few were related to the workplace and only one of these resulted in an initial follow up meeting (and ended up being resolved independently by the worker). The model itself is specifically geared in a lot of ways towards stolen rental deposits, unmade repairs in a rental unit, or stolen wages. The issues of eviction for non-payment of rent, refusal to renew a lease on the part of landlords, rent hikes and so forth were not things we were prepared for. Adding more difficulty, the people we were contacted by often were not able or willing to take a confrontational stance with their landlord. Sometimes it seemed people were expecting an approach often referred to as the service model, where a problem experienced by individuals is taken to an NPO or governmental agency who then acts on behalf of that person. And in some ways the solidarity network model does resemble this, as mostly individual grievances are to be taken on by the group. It is worth noting that the model does stress putting the individual with the grievance at the forefront of the fight, and having the network work with them on determining a course of action; ideally then that person would stick around and be part of the network for the next fight. In practice, our experiences were that this approach never actually panned out even at the level of the individual taking a key role in their grievance.

One major aspect of the solidarity network model is that it is built around individual fights, which does not allow for greater numbers of people in the same situation, say fellow tenants being screwed over by an apartment complex's landlord or property management company, to build a meaningful fight together and change the conditions for all there. In theory it could be implemented differently, and it may be worth noting that one of Seasol's earliest fights was with a large group of tenants at a local motel. However, I will hazard that in large part this would be a different project and more along the lines of a tenants union, with longer term organizing not possible for a network hopping from one call to the next. While our experience was practically solely with tenants, I think the same applies to workplace fights.

Most people we followed up with would either not return the call back, were looking for financial assistance, or often those with the most "winnable" fights would simply find a lawyer or end up working it out themselves. We did our best to familiarize ourselves with local housing law, but a lot of what we did was to simply give people the numbers to various agencies in town like a legal aid clinic or housing authority or a local crisis center. In many ways we did not have the adequate understanding of local conditions and needs, preparations to help nor an organizing skill-set to build democratic, direct action fights.

Is this different than the experiences of other solidarity networks that emerged around the same time? I could not say, as very little has been written about these difficulties to date. I do wonder if in a locale with some amount of housing organizing, say Take Back the Land or

already existing tenants union, as reformist and service oriented as they might be, would tend to allow for a few things: people locally with some amount of experience in this organizing, other approaches for those experiencing economic exploitation, and perhaps a sense of being fed up with the service model and/or undemocratic approaches to taking action.

Occupy Iowa

Occupy Iowa City was to my knowledge the first “Occupy x” place in the state, soon to be followed by several others. The first General Assembly, commonly called “GA,” took place on Thursday, October 5, and determined that the next day a local, centrally located park would be the occupation spot. That evening somewhere around 130 people came out for the first GA in the park. As the weeks went on the numbers were more around 30 of active participants for the first couple of months, with a larger number of more passive supporters and occasional campers. As everywhere else, it was predictably messy and complicated, the confused politics and consensus process that accompanied our local Occupy would be familiar to those who participated elsewhere.

There was a lot to be excited about it, as well, especially the general refusal to participate in or be recuperated by party politics, notably even by those ascribing to liberalism or progressivism. Of course, this did not translate to a refusal of reform-oriented ideology, and taking cues from the early Occupy Wall Street, actions in the form of marching on banks and calling for more financial regulatory oversight took center stage here like in OWS.

Those of us inspired by *especifismo*, coming from the solidarity network experience, most of us having been involved in local organizing going back 4–5 years, and a few longer than that, took an immediately active role in this developing movement. Taking our inspiration from comrades elsewhere in the US and around the world, we sought to involve ourselves in a positive, radicalizing dimension of the struggle then emerging.

Some things became evident early on which perhaps set us apart from what was being described elsewhere. With the above-described paucity of an organized left presence, being a fairly politically developed and committed group of militants gave us several key advantages. However, it also at times made us look premeditating or potentially controlling in ways that we had not intended. Within the first week of the occupation, we met and set out some goals and best practices which certainly aided us, but by no means prevented those difficulties. Some of the most important which I recall were to be upfront about our politics, but meet people where they were instead of preaching, to be active in all areas of the encampment that we could, and to use social mapping to understand people’s relationships and where the larger group stood.

Our Occupy also featured common difficulties, e.g. divergences over working with city officials and police, the question of non-violence and pacifism, and the role of spokespeople in relationship to the media could not help but ignite a certain amount of ideological disagreement, sometimes even heatedly so. This group of us with conscious involvement wanted to pick our battles, but put forward challenges in the unique movement-level space of Occupy for class struggle positions. Without ever trying to turn a bunch of people into militant anti-capitalists, we did seek to push an understanding of class and oppression in capitalist society and how the state figures into that, even or maybe especially in terms of how local expressions of this power manifested.

Through past experiences of working in coalitions with the modest level of left presence in Iowa, and experience facilitating consensus meetings, putting on events, making and distributing fliers, and so forth, we also gained a lot of goodwill and credibility, and this while being known as the radicals or the anarchists. Besides this assistance, we also held an anarchist reading group, although not solely limited to anarchist texts, which went for several months.

As much as there was a positive element to these experiences, it was never in question that the vast majority of participants in Occupy in our area were not being won over to class struggle positions, and the radicalizing push that was sought was not really ever achieved. The numbers of people at GAs, actions and events wound down over the winter, the encampment was effectively given up on while GAs continued, although the city had granted a permit until mid-February. This last part meant that in addition to such efforts as anti-party politics protests around the Iowa Caucuses, and calls to “support local business” (each of which were waste of effort and time in my view), there were calls to “take back the park,” which of course never materialized. The essentially liberal notion of speaking truth to power and holding a symbolic space, even while contradicting the actual capacity and interest of the most committed supporters, was never really shaken.

While I would say we did succeed in challenging certain narratives, such as “police are the 99%” and problems in general with the “99%” idea, we never achieved the goal of turning Occupy Iowa City’s attention to local instances of economic and political power. Without a doubt, this would have been difficult given the extremely broad and often unchallenged political contradictions among us in the local Occupy group. At the same time, in hindsight the opportunities were there to consciously put forward a more militant vision of action instead of being subsumed within the spirit of going along with activity which carried obvious limitations and failings.

Occupy May 1st

Occupy May 1st, Build Power/Show Power and General Strike, were all terms used for May Day this year, and our own local rally was planned in conjunction with this widespread effort.

With May Day, Occupy Iowa City had its final expression. This was the culmination in several weeks of effort, and although it was passed in GA as a plan as early as January, the gradual diffusion of participation, interest and direction meant a very small, and frankly poorly organized May Day rally in our downtown.

Fairly early in the planning, it was apparent that the rhetoric surrounding this day was loaded with some presupposed militancy that was difficult to make work in our area. The calls for general strike loom largest among them, but various memes, slogans and fliers and other eye-grabbing symbolism and slogans were hard to make use of in our context. The attempts to involve area labor activists, University students and student groups and to reach out to the formerly broad base of Occupy sympathizers unfortunately fell far short of the desired outcome.

Given the local decline in activity it may be doubtful that had everyone who took on tasks followed through on them, and had a more nuanced effort at building a broader base of support existed at a bigger level, we would have had any different outcome. There were several instances of inspiring and impressive actions and demonstrations on this day around the country, and many groups and individuals put a lot of effort into these plans. I think it is also fair to say that these still came up short in reigniting what emerged last fall, and certainly in attaining even the

inkling of the European style “social strike” of a one-day general strike call, goals that were in part an inspiration for this call.

If we build it, will they come?

I have only briefly sketched out some of the conditional differences in organizing work and some local instances of larger movement models, each of which merit their own more in-depth analyses.

In terms of differences in local conditions, I have sought to explore the unexamined, or maybe under-appreciated, elements which in many ways have a large impact on these projects and models. Aspects of these elements would appear utterly necessary, such as a broader base of supporters and larger movements in motion. Others may be a hindrance or even give a certain illusion to a meaningful response to the wider class conflict, as in the highly specified sub-milieus that create an insular political culture. By comparing our different organizing conditions in some amount of detail we can hopefully appreciate respective strengths and weaknesses and plan our activity accordingly.

In reflecting on the organizing models of recent years I have noticed at times an over-estimation in the potential for militant action on the part of individuals or groups of working class people. In the solidarity network this was an expected willingness to fight back against the boss or landlord, in Occupy and May Day it was taking a mostly marginal and diffuse mass level grouping to a more combative level of activity against capital. This is not to say that emergent movements will not or cannot become combative, but rather to temper our own approaches as militants with an understanding for how willing and able people are to fight back. Increasing this willingness and ability certainly ought to be our goal, and the best ways to do so are probably going to look different in different places. At the same time that imminent and widespread proletarian revolt is far from assured, neither is the lack of it already determined.

As detailed above, I think our local activity has vacillated somewhat between running ahead of where actual possibilities for action lay, or in the case of Occupy at times falling behind those possibilities. This is a paradox which I see at the heart of anarchist, communist and even general anti-capitalist left organizing in this time. Clearly, no ready-made set of solutions will spring from any amount of strategizing and theorizing, and to be sure we learn by doing and failing. By looking honestly at these failures, and comparing experiences with others engaged in similar projects, we can move forward class struggle projects which build a fight back worthy of today’s onslaught against the working class.

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